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Convocation address

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The Student's World

Commencement is neither an end nor a beginning. It closes one chapter and opens a new one, but the book of life goes on. For most graduates Commencement closes the chapter headed "Campus", a chapter of trials and triumphs, of work and fun, of lessons learned and unlearned. For these graduates it opens a new chapter headed "Office" or "Classroom" or "Shop" or "Farm". When it is written, this chapter, too, will tell of trials and triumphs, work and fun, and lessons learned and unlearned. But this chapter will record a life no more real than the first. In memory it may never compare in reality.

Commencement, to the pioneer along the beckoning trail of experience, is a portage. For each pioneer the trail is new. It leads to a new horizon. Of necessity the traveler goes light for he has little to take along. His equipment is in his mind, in his heart, in his soul. Shouldering his pack at Commencement, the ~~student~~ pioneer definitely sets his feet on the way to the Unknown. Others, of course, have gone before him, and like a prudent traveler he inquires about the unknown country. What reports does he receive?

The reports this year are more than ordinarily confusing. The transition to a new environment always entails some uncertainty, but in these times the nature of that new environment is a matter of conjecture. Many of the trail markings are gone. Some of these remaining may no longer be believed.

Forsaking simile, the graduating student faces a world in which the traditional concepts of economics, of government, of religion, even of manners, have dissolved. The assurance with which his baccalaureate father faced his world is gone. He sees, as his

father could not see, that a new and different order is impending; but he strains his eyes in vain for the "shape of things to come."

He is a puzzle to his elders, this graduate, but in this his elders share the plight of Adam and Eve. Unlike his father, this year's graduate is not lost in wonder at the miracle of scientific progress. Electric lights, telephones, motor cars, radio, aeroplanes, television - these in his experience have not replaced oil lamps, buckboards and the pony express. Six thousand years of experimental pause were ended before his life began, and he has taken for granted the magical fruits of modern inventive genius.

Neither does he share with his father the sense of individual opportunity which an expanding world of science and geography produced. Between the New Freedom of Wilson, with its insistence upon protected individualism, and the New Deal of Roosevelt with its program of regulative collectivism lies an era of change in economic attitudes more profound than any other in our history. Today's graduate sees a world of organizations, of collective effort, of combined resources which discourage his ambition to paint his own name upon the door and lead him to seek a place in some existing system within which he hopes to rise. This, too, he accepts as a part of life's inheritance with at least a lesser measure of repining for the good old days that are gone.

Naturally enough, in consequence, he seems less shocked at the concept of public regulation than those brought up in the full flowering of laissez faire. He objects to "regimentation" as something connoting an alien philosophy which he instinctively dislikes, but he is not deep-rooted in his conviction that the American way of life implies complete economic freedom to do as you please.

His religion, like his economics, has shed its orthodoxy. Phrases and dogmas have lost their meaning. Wide-eyed and questioning he gropes for interpretations which square with his own experience. Cant disgusts him, but in his heart he still believes in the requirement to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly, before an Unseen Power.

If his manners are free, they comport with the mores of his age and mirror only his realistic effort to adjust to the realities of his environment. Morals today are at least as sound as those of "The Age of Innocence."

Head-shaking elders to the contrary, I see no reason to believe that today's graduate is personally less fitted than his forbear for life's next adventure. Physically he is taller, heavier, better nourished, less marked by the inroads of disease. Mentally he is better equipped because his education has more nearly come to grips with vital issues. Has he become "soft?" In the sense that he has had his experience with physical hardship and privation, perhaps; though as a realist, he sees no sense in useless effort or unnecessary suffering. When, however, I study the records of the thousands of young men and women in this University who are getting an education "the hard way", working cheerfully and long, to come by the meager amounts required for frugal expenditure, I will not concede that softness has corroded their wills or their ambitions. I see them work; I see them sacrifice. I have faith in their stamina and their patriotism.

In an age when scientists and technicians have disproved the learning of the texts; when economics has ceased to follow the formulae of the schools, when religion has departed from dogma, and manners reflect the emanicipation of the mind, it is inevitable that the graduate should challenge the authority of those who would point

his way, an authority not buttressed by too brilliant a record of accomplishment. Youth wants to know; in the languages of the street, it must "be shown."

Conscious that the increasing integration of society has multiplied the dependence of each upon all, the student seeks not only the best course of his own advancement but the best program for that Society to which his destiny is bound. What ways lie open to him? What opportunities can his Society provide?

Taking stock of fundamentals an American graduate finds himself a member of a people who have possession of natural resources of almost unrivalled diversity and richness. Those people possess a capacity for converting those resources into wealth, excelled by none and equalled by very few. They occupy geographical space of matchless strategical advantages, and they live at a time in history which brings them the wisdom of antiquity and the knowledge of today.

As an individual in that society, the graduate possesses all the basic freedoms - freedom to believe, to think, to express his beliefs and thoughts; to go from place to place, to work and to cooperate; to own the fruits of his labor and to share with his fellows the control of his own government.

As a college trained man, he knows that the energies of his people, fructified by the techniques of science and applied to the resources of the land, hold a promise of abundance hitherto unknown in human history. He sees disease being conquered and life itself prolonged. Of the physical bases for a good life he can have no reasonable doubt.

Nowhere else in all the world is there so much of promise; nowhere else ^{so} great a measure of fulfillment. Yet even here, fulfillment seems to follow promise with such laggard step that the student looks upon his world with dazed misgiving. For the majority of people there is not abundance; for many there is want. For some the basic freedoms are illusory, shadows of reality which vanish in the grasp. A productive system seemingly capable of the limitless provision of ever cheapening goods periodically chokes itself with its own abundance and government espouses scarcity as an antidote to want. Annually we waste our irreplaceable heritage of soil and fuel. Group by group we counter each other's efforts and frequently form policies out of prejudice and passion.

If our graduate takes comfort in the doubtful solace that other lands are even worse than ours, that comfort is chilled by the realization that we are being ringed by peoples who have lost the basic freedoms, or most of them, and would gladly see us lose ours too; who envy our prosperity and covet our resources; who have taken up the sword as a way of life and against whom we must use up our own resources in sterile armament. Who can blame youth for misgivings? With every basic resource at its disposal humanity staggers and falters in its effort toward the better life. Is Society doomed to fall of its own ineptitude and carry with it to the depths the hopes of all its members?

This paradox - the promise of Eden negated by the waywardness of man - begets another paradox: that youth in this contingency must turn to age for faith and courage. Little though maturity has to boast of wise accomplishment, I believe the second sight of experience describes a longer future. It views that future with the perspective of a longer past. It has more faith in the

better elements of man's nature. It reflects that but for the resiliency of that better nature mankind's intelligence must have wrought his extermination ages since.

Granted that this be true, that the student is willing to adopt it as an article of faith, how does such faith in some goodness in man's nature point a clear path out of darkness and confusion? Granted that this human goodness has succored civilization in the past, how can the student be sure that history will repeat itself?

On both scores it must be said that no guaranty is assured. For those who must have complete assurance the case is weak. But it does offer the questing student a reasonable chance and, in the light of history, what more has he the right to ask?

America was built by men who took a chance, the chance of surviving disease, of escaping attacks by savages, of saving crops from drouth, of finding gold in the mountains. America was built by men who risked bankruptcy to build railroads, who risked health to conquer plagues, who risked opprobrium to bring freedom to black men and justice to white women. Youth can afford to take a chance on the best in human nature.

Youth has been indicted for seeking security instead of liberty. Our fathers sought liberty in their emigration to America, in their trek across the cloudless plains, in breaking the sod of the prairie and building cities, like Tadmore in the Wilderness. But liberty with them was not an empty name; it was liberty to better their fortunes, to found families, to attain positions of honor, to labor in the service of mankind. Put content into "liberty" and I vouch for youth's response. Show youth how to realize the possibilities of the vertical frontiers, the frontiers of science

and discovery; show youth the way to productive enterprise which can perpetuate itself; the way to government which controls evil practices without stifling freedom, and youth will show you its willingness to work, to risk, to fight, if need be, for its opportunity.

But these problems are not new. These ways have been sought with diligence. The elders have tried and failed; and now, paradox upon paradox, age must turn to youth for wisdom. Youth must bring to bear the knowledge it has gained, must build upon the foundations the fathers laid, must itself take up the search for the way to a better life.

You, graduates, who have had access to greater knowledge must take the lead in this great endeavor. In the selective service of life your numbers have been drawn and you are called. To you comes the double challenge; to stake your all upon the freedoms of democracy and to give those freedoms content and substantial form.

Students, in your world, tomorrow belongs to the frontiersmen of knowledge. Success will fall to those who have it - if they walk by faith. According to your faith, so be it unto you.